12

Graduate School Is a Human Experience of Struggling, Celebrating, and Striving Together

Graduate Life as a Collective Endeavor

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I n this chapter, we focus on collectivity. Each section first comes from an individual voice whose name is referenced in the section heading. Each "I" then shifts depending on the section author, before we come together to write in the conclusion as "we," addressing the collective "us."

Thoughts from Jenna on Collectivity

As I write this, I am sitting on a couch in my living room. Although Sam, Annie, and I have been working on this chapter together, we have not seen each other since last November. It's now June. Since they graduated from the MA program where I teach and headed off to PhD programs in other states, it's much harder to see each other in person. And yet we are still working together, still texting to let each other know when we'll have drafts and revisions finished. This is still a collective endeavor. Unfortunately, our graduate school experiences create conditions that sometimes obscure collectivity by making us feel vulnerable and isolated. There are two different ways to react to these sorts of feelings: Either you may respond individually, looking for ways to secure your own seemingly precarious resources and health, or you may respond collectively, understanding that your security, health, and well-being depend on that of others.

> So much of the graduate school experience, when framed as an individualized endeavor, promotes a notion of scarcity. A scarcity mindset—based in a deep fear that there's not enough to go around,

and any "win" or success for one of my peers is a loss for me—thrives in the myth of isolation and in the interiority of my imagined aloneness. The best way I've found to stave off a scarcity mindset is to stay in relationships with the very peers that scarcity would have me disdain or fear. Reaching out for coffee, sending a quick text, picking up the phone: Being in community always reminds me that graduate school is a human experience of struggling, celebrating, and striving together, not merely the doling out of finite resources and accolades. (Sean Kenney, University of Colorado Boulder)

We'll be thinking about this through Aimee Carrillo Rowe's (2008) lens of *politics of relation.* Carrillo Rowe argues that who we are as subjects arises in and through our relations with others. Specifically, she advocates for forming relationships across difference:

> The sites of our belonging constitute how we see the world, what we value, who we are (becoming). The meaning of self is never individual, but a shifting set of relations that we move in and out of, often without reflection. (Carrillo Rowe, 2008, p. 25)

If who we are is collective rather than individual, how do we create a graduate student atmosphere that allows us to support each other and grow together? One of the things Carrillo Rowe (2008) teaches is to think of allyship as building relations across difference with those who are on a similar level of institutional power in the academy in order to advocate on each other's behalf, and particularly for those who hold the least power. More recent scholarly and activist work has taken this a step further, advocating that we should seek to be more than simply allies, moving to the level of co-conspirator (Hackman, 2015), as allyship can be a means of avoiding responsibility or sometimes even reinforcing dominant power dynamics (Nautiyal, 2020). Co-conspirators work collectively for the benefit of the most marginalized, taking their lead but shouldering responsibility together.

Odds are that, during your graduate school experience, you will face something that throws you off-balance, makes you feel insecure, or leaves you frightened for your own future prospects. Some respond to these sorts of problems by attempting to schmooze people with institutional power in order to get individualized favors. That approach may assist one person in getting by, but it doesn't change the structures within the institution to make sure that others will not have to face the same problems in the future. Instead, for example, consider how graduate students at the University of Texas at Austin responded to the insecurity brought on by the pandemic: They stood together, writing an open letter to the administration "call[ing] upon the university to take immediate and decisive action to support and protect graduate student workers, as well as other vulnerable university employees" (UT Austin, 2020). They worked together as co-conspirators.

In this chapter, we consider what it can look like to think of graduate school as a collective co-conspiratorial endeavor and, specifically, how it can change the way we think about ethics

and professionalism, how we handle time management, and our embodied relations with each other—and ourselves. Being a co-conspirator is not easy, and I am continually messing it up. But knowing that you will fail is not a good reason not to try; rather, it's a good reason to figure out how to pick yourself up from that failure, learn from it, and try again. We hope this chapter will help you learn how to do just that.

Rethinking Ethics and Professionalism with Jenna

When someone tells you to "be professional," as a graduate student, they often mean something like don't have too much alcohol, that your manner of dress is somehow missing the mark, or that the emotionality of your writing makes them uncomfortable. What is often left unsaid is how this idea of professionalism as an individualistic achievement of "objectivity" is based on white, Western, masculine, fatphobic norms that render many graduate students "unprofessional" from the start.[1] In this section, I'd like us to rethink professional ethics in graduate school through our lens of co-conspiratorial community support in order to find a version of professionalism that can be accessed by all.

The focus on number of drinks, style of clothes, or objectivity of writing are solutions that answer the wrong problems. Rather than modifying individual behavior, we should work to create graduate cultures of collective support where we take a relational ethical perspective. That is, we need to be thinking about how the collectives to which we belong either support professional relations or make them more difficult.

> Ethics and professionalism, at least in my experience, tend to be words thrown around by white men who are uncomfortable engaging in more critical discussion about race, gender, and identity. Instilled in the idea of "professionalism" seems to be this misguided removal of emotion and personality from research. Critical research, in many cases, requires us to break down common ideals such as professionalism and examine them, understanding why nonnormative individuals might rightfully resist the cultural requirements they have underpinned. Why should the Western notion of professional dress, for example, be upheld when it predominately boxes people into specific types of expression that might not fit their personal/ cultural values? (Michael Klajbor, University of Illinois Urbana–Champaign)

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1   Following calls from Black activists and scholars, we capitalize Black and other marginalized racial identities, while leaving white lowercase in order to support Black struggles for liberation against white supremacist structures (Kapitan, 2016).

From this perspective, the well-behaved, suit-and-tie-wearing detached professional does not make any sense. Professionalism, when it is thought of as a relational ethic of care that supports and advocates on behalf of the graduate student collective in a way that uplifts everyone, does not only show up in this one singular form. Now, suits may be how some demonstrate their commitment, but when a particular style of clothing is upheld as the primary professional standard for all, more harm is done than good. We know that behavioral, clothing, and so-called "objectivity" norms are used to discipline people of color, queer and trans folks, the differently abled, and international students (Bahrainwala, 2020; Chevrette, 2020; Nautiyal, 2020).

A particularly pernicious way the norm of objectivity often shows up is through the idea that you must somehow be detached from your work in order for it to be professional. Not so: Professional objectivity is a myth. We are who we are because of our relations with those around us, and our writing is informed by those relations, whether we understand and admit it or not. But the myth of professional objectivity persists because we invest it with power. However, by individualizing everything, this myth of professionalism makes it more difficult to support other people in the graduate program, particularly those whose race, gender, sexuality, ability, or culture does not seem to "fit" the (white, Western, heteropatriarchal, ableist) norm. Instead, I offer some ways that we can build collective professionalism within our graduate departments and communities.

First, embrace vulnerability. If you came to graduate school as a perfectionist, this might be difficult. But vulnerability is vitally important, not only to your academic work but also to growing your community. Failure is a precondition for success, not its opposite. The only way you will grow as a thinker and writer is by letting other people read your essays and tell you what did and did not work. The only way you will grow as a graduate community member is by letting people read *you* and tell you what is not working. The only way others will grow is by accepting similar feedback from you. Part of being a co-conspirator is being willing to let our comrades know where they have messed up (Carrillo Rowe, 2008): when they should have stood up against that racial microaggression (Bahrainwala, 2020), when they scoffed at an international colleague's perceived naiveté (Nautiyal, 2020), when they misgendered a colleague. Part of being a co-conspirator is also recognizing that this feedback is not a personal attack, but aimed at making sure the collective is able to reach their goals. Feedback, in this light, is an invitation to be a better community member in the future. I have failed on all of these fronts, and I will again. As my colleagues and I have written elsewhere, "We cannot be finished with failure" (Jensen et al., 2020, p. 144). The bigger failure would be responding with knee-jerk reactions of denial and fragility (Chevrette, 2020). So share your writing with other graduate students. Share your struggles with writing, with publishing, with life. Your struggles with the process may help someone else through theirs. Create a community where everyone knows that if they share their experiences they will be met with care and a determination to do better in the future.

Second, hold each other up. This one may seem particularly difficult, because some programs inculcate the belief that you need to compete with one another to get an award, get published, or get a job. But, in reality, the opposite is true. When anyone in your program gets recognition,

it uplifts the reputation of the program. When someone gets published on your topic, it sends readers looking for more essays on that topic. When a communication scholar gets interviewed on national news, that's good for all of us. I know, a job is necessarily exclusive in that someone will get it and others will not. But I met some of my best friends in the discipline through jobs I did not get. The reasons I was not selected had nothing to do with "losing" any sort of competition against other candidates; rather, it was about difference in research focus, career level, or experience—that is, things over which I had no control. The more we support each other, the better we all we do. For example, pay attention to calls for special issues of journals, and send them to your colleagues working in that area. Nominate each other for awards. Create a community where people feel comfortable asking others to nominate them, because they know they will be supported. Recognize each other's victories and accomplishments.

Third, make room for self-reflection. This will mean engaging with the differential experiences and embodiments that others are starting from, as well as your own preconceived notions about them. Co-conspirators act as a bulwark for those around them, and if you are white, Western, and/or masculine-presenting in particular, you have an automatic leg up in being perceived to be professional that many of your women, LGBTQ+, BIPOC, and non-Western colleagues do not. Baharainwala (2020) makes the case that the privileged among us need to be ready to challenge racism *as it is happening*. At the same time, Nautiyal (2020) points out that sometimes standing up for others can be paternalistic, especially in regard to international students. This means you constantly need to be thinking about how your experiences and embodiment relate to those of your community. Consider the ways that you have been privileged and/or disenfranchised. Consider the different ways those around you have been privileged and/or disenfranchised. Try to educate yourself on the struggles of others that you don't yet understand. Be ready to support those around you in the very moments they need it. And be ready to take the lesson to heart without resorting to fragility if they let you know that you didn't exactly get it right. Learn, grow, and try again.

Sam on the Pressure of Time Management and Connections to Mental Health

I felt a deep sense of irony when I told Dr. Hanchey, a professor in my master's program, I would write for this chapter and found out time management was a key topic I was to write about. I had not only pushed back my master's thesis to the last possible deadline but also turned in every paper late during my first semester of the PhD. Actually, maybe this makes me the perfect person to address this topic. My experience with time mismanagement qualifies me to tell you some difficult truths. Time management may seem like a straightforward subject—but it is not. In this section, I demystify time management, discussing how time-management myths can exacerbate mental health issues and offering a framing of time management that turns toward collectivity, before concluding with practical tips.

Time management is constructed through a discourse of neoliberal rugged individualism. That is, we have told students their failure is their own fault. The myth of higher education is that if you work hard enough you can achieve success, ignoring our differential experiences and contexts. Failure has been framed as an individualized issue within higher education's culture. Focusing on time management, then, can perpetuate a myth that puts cultural responsibilities and consequences onto the individual. To demystify time management, we must first let go of the idea that we are independently in control of our success as academics. I liken this framing of time management to Gregg's (2018) ecology of the term "productivity." That is, the use of language, such as time management and productivity, carries with it a weight of histories and unequal power relations that become mystified over time. Gregg (2018) explains, "When we covet productivity in the present, we rarely consider its relationship to the manifold conditions that transformed work and home over the course of a century" (p. 19). To demystify the idea of time management as a graduate student is to critically investigate the different influences that are shaping how we use our time and whether or not we have control over them.

Procrastination is often framed as failure. Another perspective on procrastination is that procrastination denotes how we internalize the outside pressures under which we perform. The institutional system of graduate education is structured around hard-to-meet expectations that can create cycles of what feels like personal failure. These cycles are then perpetuated by norms already established in the academy and internalized within ourselves. By default we feel like we are failing as graduate students because we cannot meet all the expectations placed upon us at all times. We begin to villainize our failures rather than recognize failure as part of an important process of growing and developing our scholarly identities (Jensen et al., 2019). We cannot learn and sharpen our skill sets without learning from our failures. We must not be afraid to fail, but more importantly, we must not be afraid to embrace those failures.

I am reminded of an assignment I was given during my second semester of my PhD prompting us to write about the promise and possibilities of communication. I not only wrote about battling overwhelming feelings of self-doubt, unworthiness, and shame around my mental health issues but also about how many accomplished scholars have faced similar situations. My colleagues deeply connected to what I wrote. What normatively might seem like "failure" became a turning point for me. That's not to say that by opening up to my cohort everything became magically better, but a huge burden was lifted. I not only relieved my own burdens through sharing but also initiated a space where everyone else could too.

I had been facing struggles with my mental health from the start of my PhD program because I had not released the illusion of control. This illusion (or delusion) was that if I tried hard enough I could get through this on my own—a bootstrap mentality. However, there are just some things that rolling up your sleeves and working hard cannot solve. Upon starting my first semester, my partner went two months without full-time employment after we moved to Nebraska and then, shortly after, my father moved in to live with us. So not only did I have to work through the stresses that came with living in a new place and starting a new graduate program, but also had to deal with the complexities of switching roles from daughter to parent with my father.

It was difficult to reach out to my community of graduate students and faculty, not because they did not make themselves accessible but because of the shame I was feeling. Much of this shame was not mine, but shame I took on because there is a profound stigma around mental health—even when the circumstances make struggles perfectly reasonable. I was going through a lot; of course, I would be struggling! Yet I still felt embarrassed, and I isolated myself rather than reach out. When I finally did start talking to my community about my difficulties, there was not one faculty member I met who didn't disclose their own struggles during their first semester of doctoral work. Your struggles will look different from mine; maybe they will seem less strenuous or more—that is not the point. The point is that we are not in a vacuum during our studies. Life continues to happen, and many of us will battle with our mental health. The more honest I was about my experience, the more my colleagues were honest about their struggles and the more transparent the conversations became about how we could support each other.

Writing and sharing my struggles did not magically fix everything. I sought out resources, including therapy. I still struggle with my self-doubt, but things are getting easier. The writing assignment reminded me of the power of being open and that much of the shame, self-doubt, and pain we carry is not simply our own, but a societal burden that we must continue to work toward demystifying.

In a perfect world I would love to see a shift in how we structure graduate school, providing more space to learn at a different pace, in different ways, and without highly pressurized standards that privilege whiteness, ability, and cis-heteronormativity. While we have come a long way, we all stand witness to the distance we need to overcome. I cannot promise you that you will never procrastinate or feel defeated, but I can offer ways for you to reframe your perspective. Your procrastination and failures do not define you, and they do not mark your intelligence, capabilities, or possibilities. The pressures are actually part of a larger system of standards and benchmarks that are not working to serve you. The tips I offer you are ways to turn from individualized framing toward collectivity, as the more we work to support each other, the less power we give to the fear of failure and procrastination.

First, everyone procrastinates. Think of the person in your program who seems like they have it all together—I promise they procrastinate. However, what procrastination looks like for them may be different from what it looks like for you. And I bet you they feel just as stressed, guilty, and frustrated as you do. One good tip is to set a timer for a set period of time to work. My colleague, who to me always seems on top of her game, has told me, "Look, we all watch YouTube instead of reading that article or writing that proposal. That is why I set a timer." I do too now. A timer commits you to working for 20 minutes or whatever time frame you choose. This both helps to get you started and ensures that you take breaks in between working blocks.

Second, progress doesn't always look like studying or writing. One of my colleagues shared how they reconceptualized productivity as going to the gym, getting coffee with a friend, spending time with family. Taking care of your whole self is also an important part of finding success in your career. So schedule in time for self-care. Schedule in your walk, coffee break, dinner with family—whatever you need for you. Let go of the guilt you may feel around not

doing coursework, research, teaching preparation, and other tasks that are important to your education and career by also prioritizing these other valuable components of your life. This will be a prioritization effort that will prepare you for your life after graduate studies as well.

Third, you are not alone. Often, programs (or even cohorts) create a culture of competition. One's doubts, insecurities, and moments of struggle become ways we isolate ourselves because we are afraid of seeming weak or incapable. It is important to find ways that feel safe to talk about the realities of your experience. Being open about your hardships may be a means of pioneering a new environment in your program or, on a smaller scale, helping a trusted colleague express their own difficulties. On whatever scale is comfortable, it is important that you seek out support that offers solutions beyond bootstrap advice.

Annie on the Weight of Embodiment and Connections to Physical Health

When I first announced I wanted to pursue a PhD, the responses around me varied from wondering whether I could be away from my family to making sure I understood the workload of academia. I was not concerned about anything, except how it would affect my daughter. I am an immigrant, a first-generation student, and a mom and can be almost arrogant when it comes to my workload. I did not think a PhD would be any harder than raising my daughter while working two jobs and working on a MA. I was wrong. Being a first-year doctoral student is one of the most exhausting things I have ever done. It takes a toll physically, mentally, and emotionally, which is based not only on what is required of you but also the expectations you put on yourself.

As a Mexican American woman moving to Iowa for my PhD, I armed myself with the words of Anzaldúa (2015), Carrillo-Rowe (2008), and Lorde (2015). My daughter, my dad, my dog, and I drove across the country. Channeling Anzaldúa's rebel with a deep belief in Lorde's notion that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house, we drove without anything but a few of my daughter's toys and our clothes. To me the act of moving across country into a space that is not your own is in itself resisting. As we drove, I stared at the power lines, trusting that I would be able to create alliances, find co-conspirators, and craft spaces in our new home just as Carrillo-Rowe explained. My only desire was to survive the first semester. But survival did not quite address how I fit and saw myself in my new space.

Shome (2003) explains the way in which spatial perspectives and contextual relations need to be considered in communication studies. Shome demonstrates that power is constituted not only by identity but also the places we inhabit. In moving from my master's program in Reno to my PhD program in Iowa City, I moved from a place where the student population is more than 20% Latinx to one in which it is less than 7%—even less when it comes to graduate students. I carried my border identity from Reno to Iowa City, but the way in which I was perceived changed. In Iowa City the "student standard is still assumed to be young, white, middle-class

non-disabled heterosexual women and men" (Romero, 2018, p. 62). I am a Mexican American woman in her 30s, and I was suddenly out of place.

For all the intersectional scholars I've studied, I was suddenly aware of my race and ethnicity differently. I became aware of the weight of my steps and the heaviness of the gazes on my back. I began to carry a load on my shoulders that went beyond my backpack. It was a load that was both psychological and emotional. Because I sensed myself differently, I stood and walked differently. I began to have migraines that made me lose my train of thought, my imagination, and, in essence, my voice. I could not write. As Anzaldúa (2015) reflected:

> I lack imagination you say
>
> No. I lack language.
>
> The language to clarify
>
> My resistance to the literate. (p. 165)

My stress and unrealistic expectations were now reflected on my body, and all of it came to a pinnacle in December during the final week of my first semester. But it had started long before.

Encouraged by a friend, I began applying for communication MA programs the summer my daughter Galia turned one. Instead of slowing down, I decided to forego sleep and use the little time I had to attain a degree. Into the MA program I went, and after barely sleeping for a year, I figured that not sleeping for another two years would hardly make a difference. I never imagined that I would fall in love with communication studies, become a scholar indefinitely, and never sleep again.

The lack of sleep, two jobs, and mommying around the clock started taking a toll on my body by the second year of my MA. I started gaining weight, getting migraines, and carrying an inhaler. By the time I graduated, I was exhausted, but I still did not stop. I had determined to go for my PhD, so instead of resting after I finished school, I spent the summer coordinating my daughter's custody arrangements with lawyers, preparing for our move, and finishing up work with my previous employer. By the time I arrived at University of Iowa, the migraines would make me pass out for hours. I was not taking care of my body, and for reasons I had yet to figure out, I would lose my balance and fall while walking on campus. Still, I continued to push myself to get my daughter and me settled into our new life.

That collapse that I dreaded occurred during the final week of the fall semester. Walking back from lecture on a Monday afternoon, I slipped on four concrete steps, injuring my back to the point where it was grueling to move. However, even then, I did not go to a doctor or reach out for assistance. I had an eye exam that week and did not want to miss any more time from school. It was during the eye exam, after failing multiple tests, that I was sent to the emergency room. I was told I had multiple problems, including a cyst above my kidneys, prior back injuries, and problems with my overall structure that most likely developed during my pregnancy.

Alone, each of these things could not cause much damage, but without care, they had taken a toll on my body.

With a new semester beginning, I was faced with visits to oncology, physical therapy, chiropractors, and tests, all while trying to care for my daughter. I was frustrated and was finally forced to stop and think about what I was doing to my body and what I had to do going forward. I was forced to evaluate what I had avoided for over two years. I realized it was time for me to set aside time to take care of myself and to reach out for help and rely on the community around us. I did, and I received more support than I could have imagined. By the end of the first year at the University of Iowa, I made the kinds of friendships that will last a lifetime.

Flores (1996) explains that Chicana feminist scholars have a hard time belonging in academia because we are confined geographically and rhetorically by how people respond to our bodies. Flores's resolution is to create our own spaces by embracing our heritage. In learning about our culture, we are empowered to create our own rhetorical spaces. To thrive, we must first accept and understand our differences and then create who we want to be without preimposed boundaries. In entering the program with the idea of simple survival, I set myself up to follow the rhetoric that was created for me in that space, as opposed to crafting my own identity. As a woman of color, I entered a space, and instead of making it mine, I allowed it to influence who I was, and this took a toll on my whole being. I exhausted myself with my own expectations of what others wanted me to be.

While this is my narrative, many graduate students have similar experiences, and we can learn from each other. Anzaldúa (2015) made it clear that we must embrace looking, walking, and writing differently because in doing so we confront our demons and find our voice. But beyond that, finding our voice can mean making sure that others do not have to go through what we did. As Lorde (2015) teaches, "Survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to stand alone … and how to make common cause with others who identify outside the structures, in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish" (p. 95). We should be thinking beyond survival and toward thriving and creating room for others to follow.

Tupo Pamoja?

One of Jenna's favorite Swahili phrases is *tupo pamoja*, or "we are together." "Tupo pamoja" can be a declaration, indicating your support for a friend or colleague. "Tupo pamoja" can also be a statement, recognizing your inherent imbrication in networks of relation with those around you. Importantly, "tupo pamoja" is also used as a question: Are we together? By asking if we are together, "tupo pamoja" acts as an opportunity to highlight where connections have been missed, where there are misunderstandings, mistaken assumptions—where someone was lost or excluded along the way.

When we think about graduate school as a collective rather than individual endeavor, we must ask "for who?" Is it a collective endeavor for BIPOC students? Is it a collective endeavor for non-POC queer students? I think that graduate school should be a collective endeavor, but the system of higher education was never meant for some students—particularly Black students and other students of color. If the system itself was created so that some students can succeed with more ease than others, we must reconceptualize what collectivity means. If a department is comprised of predominantly privileged bodies (able bodies, cis bodies, white bodies, male bodies), then is collectivity possible? We should really pause to think about what a radical collectivity for all bodies could look like. (anonymous PhD student)

We moved through this chapter from speaking primarily in first-person singular—"I" to "you"—to speaking primarily in first-person plural—"we" to "us." We hope that we are together. We would like to speak as a collective. But it's important that we always ask "tupo pamoja?" The answer lies with you, with *us*. Together, we can do more than make graduate student life a supportive and energizing experience—we can grow a discipline that acts to facilitate camaraderie and coalition rather than individualism and competition.

For Further Thought and Reflection

1. How are we, together with our colleagues, acting as co-conspirators and providing support? How are we failing, and how might that be addressed? Try to come up with specific examples personally, as a graduate cohort, as a program, and as a discipline.

2. What are the standards of professionalism and time management to which we ascribe? How might these penalize women, queer folks, people who are disabled, or people of color? How can they be recognized, navigated, and/or changed?

3. How might we learn to see self-care as both an individual and collective endeavor in our graduate programs? What opportunities might that perspective afford?

4. How can we strengthen the support networks of our programs and discipline?